

One
of the
First
Priorities --

A LIBRARY

*A History
of the
Fairhope Public Library*

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The History of the Fairhope Public Library

**Edited by:
Jean Zadnichek
Betty Suddeth
Ann Taylor Blauer**

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A Poor Man's Effort

Ernest B. Gaston (1861 - 1937) once said that Fairhope and the Single Tax Colony had been essentially a poor man's effort. Gaston was certainly referring to physical or material wealth. The fact cannot be denied that the community of Fairhope from the very beginning attracted individuals of the highest intellectual and spiritual wealth and character. Fairhope has fostered an atmosphere of idealistic equality and democracy which, let us hope, will always be one of Fairhope's charms.

Less than six months after the first pioneer Single Tax families began grubbing out homesteads from the harsh environment on the Fairhope site, a Single Tax friend, George B. Lang of Seneca, Missouri, donated a collection of books for a "Fairhope Free Library." This basic library material brought pleasure and relaxation to the hardy settlers after days of toil and during rainy periods when work outside was not possible.

We can be very proud that our little town has had access from the very beginning to a collection of books and other reading material to keep its citizenry informed. The Single Taxers envisioned the formation of a public library in Fairhope even before they came to "Stapleton's Pasture" on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay.

Intellectual Atmosphere

Since books are a vital necessity to intellectual minds, it was natural that one of the first Fairhope Single Tax Colony's projects was to develop a community library to meet the needs for pleasure reading, literary reference and research. Very early the colony had to decide which was the most important, school or library facilities? Naturally a school won first priority, so a considerable sum of money, which had been accumulated in a "library fund", was loaned or diverted to a school building. It was many years later before the original library fund could be replaced and used as first intended.

Edward Howland (1832 - 1890)

The story of the Fairhope Public Library began many years before the books were placed on the shelves. Many of the original books, now secured in display cases in the library, came from Amsterdam, Leipzig, Paris, Oxford and London where they were collected during the 1850's by book enthusiast Edward Howland.

Edward Howland, born at Charleston, South Carolina in 1832 and a graduate of Harvard in 1853, was an author in his own right and a lover of fine books and literature. As a professional buyer of fine books for New York antiquarian dealers, he travelled abroad and attended many book auctions all over continental Europe. On these buying trips Howland accumulated many fine items for his own personal collection. It was about this time, 1860, that Howland and several other intellectuals of the period, including Walt Whitman, published a New York literary

magazine, *The Saturday Press*. A lack of finances and the beginning of the Civil War ended this literary venture and necessitated the sacrifice of some of Howland's most cherished literary treasures.

In 1865 Edward Howland married Mrs. Marie Stephens Case, whom he had met in his travels. Marie Case was a woman whose tastes and interests complemented his own, and they became a most compatible couple. They first lived in New York City, but eventually they moved to a little farm near Hamonton, New Jersey and established a cozy home in an atmosphere of several thousand choice books. In New Jersey, the Howlands experimented with raising fruits and vegetables and became very active in the new agriculture Grange movement.

Intellectual and progressive-minded men and women were attracted to the Howlands, to the point of visiting them on weekends to discuss utopian schemes. Many proposals tending toward a better pastoral life through community cooperation were discussed in detail. Among the many forward-thinking visitors was Albert K. Owen. Desiring to demonstrate the feasibility of his financial theories coupled to community living, Owen developed elaborate plans for establishing a self-help community in Mexico at Topolobampo, Sinaloa. The Howlands, being like-minded with Owen, sold their pleasant farm home in New Jersey and joined his group.

A Mexican Utopia

The story of the Mexican colony, like so many utopian colonies of that period which failed to materialize, has been recorded in books such as *Cat's Paw Utopia* by Ray Reynolds. Edward Howland, already in failing health when he left New Jersey and no doubt weakened by strenuous pioneer living conditions in the bleak Mexican colony, survived but two years after joining the Sinaloa, Mexico colony. He died December 24, 1890. His widow, Marie Howland, remained in Sinaloa, edited the tiny newspaper, and being concerned with the intellectual life of the community, set up a library with the Howland collection as a nucleus. When the utopian Mexican colony failed a few years later, Mrs. Howland returned to the United States with her library almost intact.

Fairhope Single Tax Colony

Having heard of a "Single Tax Colony" based on the theories of Henry George and newly established at Fairhope on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay, Alabama, Marie Howland investigated. She inquired by mail to her many friends in the United States as well as by correspondence with the fledgling colony at Fairhope. As a result in 1899, filled with enthusiasm and good will, she came to the embryonic village of Fairhope to make her future home.

Marie Howland's experience with newspaper reporting, both in New York and the Topolobampo, Mexico colony, made her a useful editorial assistant to Ernest B. Gaston, a prime mover in the founding of the Fairhope Single Tax Colony and editor of the world-wide circulated newspaper, *The Fairhope Courier*. Marie Howland contributed "open letters" to the *Courier*, addressed to friends throughout the world, telling of her own life and times and Single Tax experiences in this new, undeveloped but rapidly growing and most vigorous little village of Fairhope, Alabama.



Marie Howland at her home in "The Pines".

Mrs. Howland's Letters

After her small cottage had been built among the graceful Fairhope pines, Mrs. Howland's letters dealt with her roses, plants and trees. As a versatile, outgoing, and independent individual, she was equally happy among her friends or digging in her fruitful garden. She was always present at discussion groups on Sunday afternoons or whenever they occurred in mid-week. She was a prolific writer and her letters in *The Fairhope Courier* were always interesting. They had a most favorable influence among world-wide readers, by showing the unusual intellectual life to be enjoyed in Fairhope.

Among her letters appeared an answer to a reader who presumed that Fairhope, being such a small village, was a very dull place lacking in culture, places to go and things to do. Mrs. Howland's answer enumerated the multiplicity of events currently being enjoyed by the townspeople, plans for the future and the vast possibilities of entertainment for individuals and groups of persons. She even lamented the fact that so many interesting things were available for enjoyment, no one person could possibly attend them all and at the same time perform necessary household duties!

Fairhope's First Library

When Marie Howland's new home had been completed, she had her library of books removed from storage in Kansas, where they had rested from shipment from Mexico, and shipped to her at Fairhope. Marie Howland had expressed hopes of establishing a small public library in her home and many distant corresponding friends contributed generously from their own libraries, in order that they too might share in the library project in Fairhope. In her letters she recounted with pride the making by friendly neighbors of shelving and furniture to supplement her own bookcases. As time passed, it was necessary to add yet more shelves and cases, even some on her porch against the house walls, where they were beyond reach of inclement weather.

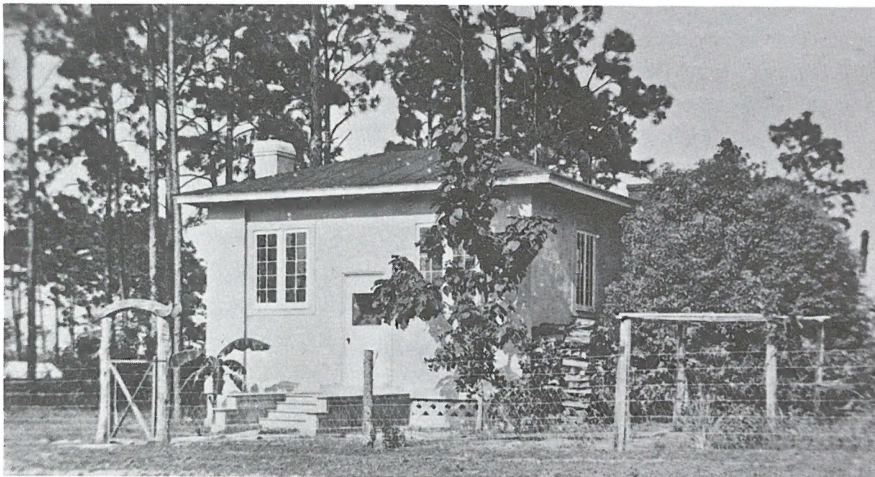
About the year 1900 the townspeople of Fairhope began to fully utilize the generous library services and the books provided by their pioneer neighborly citizen. Lending books required records and, as circulation of the Howland books increased, the demands on Mrs. Howland's personal time became too numerous. Several public-spirited residents volunteered to relieve Mrs. Howland of the personal sacrifice which she was making in the public interest. So, in 1900 the Fairhope Public Library became truly a public library supported in part by small, voluntary membership fees from interested citizens, and in part by community tax funds being collected by the Fairhope Single Tax Corporation.

A Pioneer Librarian

Marie Howland's system of conducting a public library would not be used today though it did work very smoothly and served quite well as long as she personally had charge. She knew nearly every volume in the library and could lay her hands on any wanted book almost blindfolded. It has been said in amusement that Mrs. Howland used physical size as a basis for cataloging; in other words, the small books were shelved together and all the larger ones were similarly segregated. A system of letters and numerals were used on the cases and shelves. A person would find Henry George's Progress and Poverty at "E-3" or Longfellow's poems on shelf 5 in section A.

The collection of books in the embryonic Fairhope Public Library continued to increase in number and quality and the fledgling Library Association began to concern itself with plans for more commodious quarters. Mr. Joseph Fels, a wealthy soap manufacturer and long-time friend of Fairhope Single Taxers, had previously given one thousand dollars toward a library building. However, since the hurricane of 1906 had destroyed the school building, this gift was used temporarily to provide facilities for a school, and the library plans were held in abeyance.

Meanwhile, the growth of the village necessitated a new street. As a result, Summit Street was cut through from Fairhope Avenue to Magnolia Avenue, including many feet on the west side of Mrs. Howland's grove of pines. This left her cottage to face the new extension. Midway between her cottage and North Summit, a new one room library structure was built, using largely volunteer labor and materials furnished by civic minded citizens. The books in Mrs. Howland's cottage were then transferred and shelved in the new quarters. In the year 1908, Mrs. Howland generously presented her collection to the Single Tax Corporation to operate and hold in trust for the community of Fairhope.



One of the first priorities . . . a library. - c. 1908.

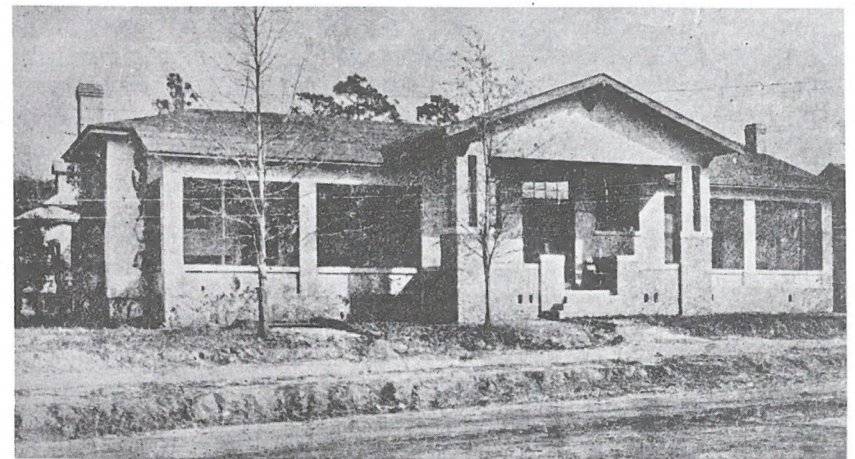
Marie Howland continued as librarian for another eventful nine years. She was assisted by many eager and willing school children who loved working with books and with the library lady who was always so cheerful and laughed so easily. As her health began to fail, Mrs. Howland was unable to keep the new library open as much as she wished but, with limited funds and volunteer assistance, she managed to open at least two days a week.

As a tribute to Mrs. Howland when she died in 1921, the simple funeral service was held in the library building that had for so long been the object of her care and affection. Ernest B. Gaston and the Reverend George W. Wood conducted the service, and her body was laid to rest in the Colony cemetery located at the corner of Section and Oak Streets.

As with all growing things, the Fairhope Public Library again ran out of space for its ever-increasing collection of books. With the aid of the now-available gift from Mr. Fels, a larger room plus an entrance and front porch were added in 1919.

Mrs. Lydia J.N. Comings succeeded Mrs. Howland as librarian in 1917. Mrs. Comings had pioneered many of Fairhope's initial cultural advances and was president of the original Library Association. She maintained enthusiasm and public interest among Fairhope's citizens toward the upkeep and advancement of the library. She gave up the position as Librarian in 1921 but continued to serve as president of the Library Association until 1941.

Mrs. Mary Heath Lee became the first regularly paid librarian in April, 1921, and in collaboration with Mrs. Comings, she increased the library hours to an eight-hour, six-day-a-week job. Mrs. Lee was ably assisted during her nine year tenure by her daughter, Mildred. Library patrons of today owe Mrs. Lee a tremendous debt of gratitude for the high standards of library management she developed in those early days of long hours and scant remuneration. During her tenure Mrs. Lee attended library conferences at Signal Mountain, Tennessee, at Birmingham, Alabama and at Biloxi, Mississippi. She also attended a library school conducted by Emory University.



The library presented a new look when it hosted the Alabama Library Association meeting in 1925.

Even in those early days, the Fairhope Library was a member of the Alabama State Library Association and became an affiliate of the Southeastern Library Association as well. In 1925 the Alabama State Library Association held a widely-attended meeting in Fairhope celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the Fairhope Public Library. The state library association members were guests for a second meeting in Fairhope in the year 1938. Mrs Lee often spoke of how light her library duties seemed and of the great joy she received working with so many and varied volunteers who had traveled widely and had such interesting personalities.

The library continued through the years to draw a large number of volunteers who were eager to assist as needed with the library's work. With little fanfare, the citizens worked toward the very best library possible. Individuals donated books, personal services, and finances. Garden clubs demonstrated their skills and love of flowers and shrubs by planting and maintaining the library grounds.

When Mrs. Lee's health began to fail at the end of 1930, she was replaced at her request by Mrs. Martha Albers, with Mrs. Bertha Mershon assisting. The tempo of library activity increased and volunteers were kept busy. Mrs. Ellyn Beaty taught a group new library methods, and a Mrs. Gilmer from Bay Minette conducted numerous seminars in bookbinding and book maintenance.

About 1933 the government Works Progress Administration (WPA) subsidized a work program that considerably benefitted our local library. All available space was given over to a group of women engaged in rebinding and lettering books and other activities necessary for library maintenance. The WPA Project was still in motion when Mrs. Mershon became librarian in 1934. Her assistant, Miss Mary Bishop, was appointed to manage and direct the Project until 1942, when the government discontinued these projects.

In 1946 Miss Bishop took over the duties of librarian with Miss Ruth Jeffcott as her capable assistant. When Miss Bishop relinquished her duties, it was necessary to bring Mrs. Lee from retirement to again direct the library, and Miss Jeffcott continued as her assistant.

Miss Anna Braune was the librarian from 1948 to 1956. Miss Braune had moved to Fairhope from New York and was a renowned illustrator and author of children's books. In spite of failing health, she took an interest in all phases of library work and was popular with the town's citizens. Her art work as well as the illustrations in her books appealed to both adults and children. She was so beloved in Fairhope that the children's wing in the present library bears her name.

During Miss Braune's tenure the Fairhope Single Tax Corporation approved and paid for the addition of a much needed large room for the library. In addition, natural gas was installed and new electrical lighting added. Then both the interior and exterior were renovated and repainted, and the entire building was re-roofed.

It was through the generous support of the Single Tax Corporation that the library was able for so many years to provide library services for all the citizens of Fairhope. The library patron, whether a Single Taxer or not, was offered the services free of charge. On numerous occasions,



Anna Braune's appealing line drawings from *The Bojabi Tree* by Edith Rickert.

the Single Tax Corporation suggested the City of Fairhope assume the public library operation, and at last, on May 1, 1964, the Colony Library came under the management of the city. This action was taken in order that a more equitable distribution of financing could be attained rather than have a minority of the citizens financing this valuable community heritage.

Mrs. Roland P. Carr, a native of Iowa, succeeded Miss Braune as librarian in 1957 and served until 1972. Miss Joyce Antinarella was her principal assistant during that period. During the years of Mrs. Carr's tenure as director, the annual circulation of books grew from 15,000 volumes to almost 70,000. In 1970 the library's book circulation was triple that of any other town in Alabama with a comparable population of approximately 6,000!

One of the outstanding services the library offers is its weekly book review. During Mrs. Carr's directorship, an interested group began to meet in the library's lobby to discuss literary matters, and thus the Tuesday Book Reviews evolved. They have continued by popular demand.

It was also during Mrs. Carr's tenure that a group of interested patrons formally organized a group whose goal was to raise funds needed to alleviate some of the monetary and physical difficulties of the library. Thus, in 1959, the first "Friends of The Fairhope Public Library" was formed with Mrs. Gay Caffee as Chairman. Through the years the organization has performed smoothly and has attained the greater part of its original goal.

In 1972, however, it was determined that the "Friends" could be even more effective by amending the Constitution so that donors might have the privilege of writing-off financial contributions to the non-profit organization. With the approval of the Internal Revenue Service, donations to the organization became tax deductible.

The Friends of the Fairhope Public Library have proven to be friends indeed. Their many activities have culminated in substantial financial gains for the library, making available numerous physical assets. They have also provided needed services, and their planned events have increased interest in library activities. The organization sponsors the weekly book reviews as well as the annual book sale. Since its inception, the accomplishments of this fine group of volunteers have been praised highly by each librarian.

The annual book sale was initiated during the tenure of Mrs. Frances Black (librarian from 1972 to 1977) when it was decided to cull some of the obsolete books on the overly-crowded shelves in the library. Patrons and friends added many of their personal books to the supply and eagerly came forward to assist in that first sale. This sale has become a successful event bringing in several thousand dollars each March.

While Mrs. Black was librarian, a large meeting room, complete with kitchen facilities and restrooms, was constructed. Located on the northern end of the building, the room was made attractive with hand-embroidered linen draperies at the spacious windows. Appropriately, the room became the "Marie Howland Room." At last, comfortable quarters were provided for book reviews, lectures, films and receptions! Mrs. Black's resignation was accepted with deep regret when the Blacks moved to Columbus, Ohio. Her record of achievements was outstanding.

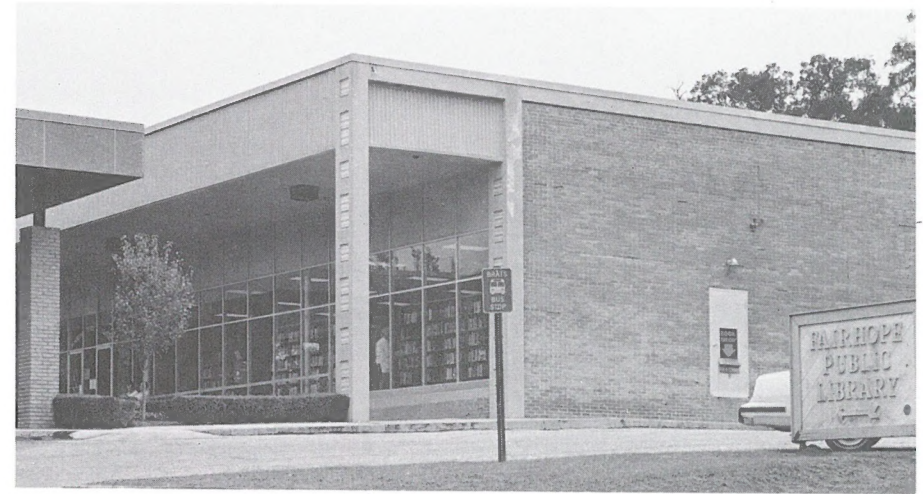
Becoming librarian in June, 1977, Miss Claire Oakes, a Mississippian, served for only a short while, and her duties were then taken over by Mrs. Nena King Shelly of Point Clear. She was assisted by Mrs. Betty Suddeth and Mrs. Donna Soto, both Fairhopesians. By this time an automated



The addition of the Marie Howland Room completed the structure to date. The University of South Alabama Baldwin County currently uses the building for administrative offices.

circulation system had been adopted, requiring borrowers to have identification cards in order to check out books or other library materials. A little later, non-residents of Fairhope were required to pay ten dollars a year for library cards, which was equal to the amount paid in library taxes by Fairhope residents.

Betty Suddeth became the Director in 1982 and has continued to serve until the present time. During her tenure several major changes affecting the library have taken place. To many library patrons, the most extreme was the change of the library's location from Summit Street to its present location. They were saddened to leave the old building where they had spent so many happy hours; however, everyone agreed that the move was a necessity. There was simply no more room for expansion of the old library.



The library's current location in the Civic Center complex.

The City of Fairhope had purchased a shopping center complex on Oak Street for a much-needed Civic Center, and the architectural plans included space for the library at the western end of the complex. In March of 1983 a reception welcomed everyone to the library's spacious new facilities. There was ample room for the many volumes and other materials and even a reading room, complete with fireplace, chairs, and cases for rare books, special collections, and cherished mementos from the old library. Regrettably, the book reviews were relegated to a suite in the Civic Center.

After a few years, however, the library's eastern wall was removed and an attractive children's wing opened. Beyond that, a meeting room at last! Library patrons and other interested citi-



The city's beautification project accents the library's entrance.



Mementos from the original library bring a touch of warmth and history to the new reading room.

zens could boast that the Fairhope Public Library must rank now as one of the best equipped libraries in the state of Alabama.



From picture books to puppets, learning is fun in the Anna Braune Children's Wing.

With the advent of library automation, even more changes will be required to move the Fairhope Library into the 21st century. Some of the changes have already been introduced with the addition of computers for the circulation process. Future plans call for complete automation, including public access catalogs, CD-ROM databases, word processing stations, along with expansion of facilities to accommodate these added technologies.

The one constant that has remained since Marie Howland's day is the library's purpose, which is to make available materials which will help meet the informational, educational, cultural, social and recreational needs of the citizens of Fairhope.